

## – III –

### THE FRAME

After Dartmouth, I taught math at a private school for a few years, a job I landed mostly by suggesting the *papas y huevos taco* to a random guy at *Lou's Diner* — but that's another story. Sometime during March, the school would send a letter home with each student asking the parents to indicate their plans for the coming year. The letter went something like this:

Dear Parent, as this year draws to a successful close, we at Salisbury are already determining the budget for the next one. To inform this process, we ask that you return the enclosed commitment card indicating your plans for the coming year.

We provided the parent an envelope and a small candy cane.

A student of mine, Marci, brought back an envelope that seemed a bit fatter than the rest. I did not think much of it until the principal called me into her office. Rather than send back the commitment card, Marci's dad had returned a lengthy letter, which lay on the principal's desk. She read it to me, and it went something like this:

During the last year, Salisbury has failed to address even the most prosaic issues we parents brought to its attention last May. We still wait half an hour every afternoon due to Salisbury's inefficient dismissal procedures. We still worry about the lack of an integrated fire alarm system, and the school has failed to install a much-needed security solution to protect our children during the day.

It is therefor[sic] unsurprising that Salisbury failed to address our less mundane concerns as well. Marci is still taught Spanish by a teacher whose English she cannot understand. She still receives inadequate time to complete her work during study hall, forcing her to finish her assignments at home, cutting into family time. Worse, her math teacher [*that would be me*] has relentlessly given exams all year no mere mortal could

possibly complete in the time allotted. We cannot in good conscience put her through another such year.

Were that not enough, Salisbury has also failed to modernize their computer lab or dismiss uncertified...

The letter went on and on describing the father's gripes, and it ended rather abruptly after three pages of criticism with no indication that he planned to re-enroll Marci. Twice her dad said he could not allow Marci to go through another year like this one. The principal drafted a letter lamenting that Marci's needs were not being met and stating that we wished her well next year at whatever school her parents transferred her to.

Imagine our surprise when we received another note a few days later that essentially said "Oh, we were not planning on changing schools. Marci will stay at Salisbury for next year."

Why is this response so shocking? To put a fine point on things, the original letter is misleading for two reasons:

- It leaves out something of vast importance which is not suggested by the letter as a whole, something we would expect to read if it were true (that the parents were going to re-enroll Marci).
- It includes several particular points (the complaints) that, on their face, indicate a stance the writer does not have, and no efforts are made to stop the reader from misunderstanding these points.

If the gospel message were really what evangelicals indicate, then these same criticisms apply to the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If all are bound to hell without Christ's intervention, and only those who believe are saved from the eternal wrath of God, then the gospels written by these three men leave us scratching our heads. Why would they not clearly state this "gospel," and why would they incorporate so many teachings of Christ that consistently lead their readers to other conclusions?

These questions and observations left me bewildered. Christian study materials are not much help. I urge you to consult commentaries and read their explanations of passages like those I've cited so far. I believe you'll find they tend to bend Christ's words to match a theology not found in the text.

Is Paul wrong? I didn't accept that. For whatever reason, Jesus repeatedly speaks of people being **righteous** and a Judgment based on deeds with no reference to believers and non-believers being treated differently, yet Paul appears to stress the opposite: **For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves — it is the gift of God.**

To summarize these differences:

- Favoritism* Paul seems to say believers and non-believers are treated very differently at the Judgment. Jesus never indicates partiality, and many of His teachings would look odd if there were any:
- Forgiveness* All are forgiven when they forgive others. No one who fails to forgive is forgiven.
- Judgment* All are judged in the same way they judge others.
- Sin* All are in danger of condemnation due to their sin, including believers. Indeed, *Mark 9:43–48* is addressed only to His disciples.
- Works/Faith* Every discussion of the Judgment by Jesus relates to words and deeds, and some believers are rejected by Christ. On the other hand, Paul writes, in *Romans 8:1*, **There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**
- Righteousness* Jesus calls certain people **righteous** based on their deeds, even those who lived before Him and did not know of a coming savior. He refers to others as **doing what is good**. However, Paul claims that **no one is justified by the works of the law.**

I read and read and pondered and thought, finding no fully satisfactory solution. I couldn't share much of this struggle with others in my fellowships. As I'm sure many of you can appreciate, most churches are not very welcoming of questions about the faith, even from those who are serious believers. Posing questions about the faith is confused with questioning the faith itself.

When I did ask leaders and peers about these issues, the responses suggested they had given little thought to these quandaries. No one seemed to really want to wrestle with what scripture said.

## Is Our Frame Crooked?

If Paul and Jesus appear to give conflicting descriptions of the Judgment, perhaps the problem lies in our reading. Maybe our fundamental assumptions cause us to see things that aren't there.

For example, consider the question *what is the purpose of religion?* I think many grow up (as I did) thinking religion's purpose is to secure your spot in the afterlife. We see Christianity as answering *How do I get to heaven?* in the same sense that science answers questions concerning the natural world.

That notion would seem half-baked and misinformed to the Jews. The ruling Jewish sect, the Sadducees, did not believe in the afterlife at all. And those Jews who believed in an afterlife did not focus on it. Some held the coming Messiah had something to do with this afterlife, some didn't. It was simply not a critical part of their beliefs, certainly not the central purpose of God's plan.

The Jews of Jesus' day cherished a connection with God spanning two millennia, back to the promise made to Abraham. Their entire society revolved about the fact that they were God's chosen people. Belief in God impacted their culture as gravity impacts ours. The idea that religion was meant to answer the question "how does one get to heaven?" would make as much sense to them as saying bakers exist to give out free samples. Asking the Jews why they believed in God would be akin to asking a mother why she loves her children.

While we're discussing basic assumptions, consider the question "What is salvation?" We use the term all the time. Those passages where Paul appears to conflict with Jesus describe how we are **saved**. What does the word mean?

To Jews (e.g., Paul), the term *salvation* referred to God's rescuing them from *their oppressors* and elevating them *above other nations*. In *Luke 1:71* Zechariah prophesies that Jesus would bring **Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us**. This is a prophet of God speaking God's Word. The disciples show the same understanding in *Luke 24:21* at the end of His ministry: **We had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.**

Many Christians believe this simply shows Jewish ignorance of God's plan. But where did God describe this plan? Jesus says the prophets spoke of Him and the coming Kingdom. What did they say? The prophets describe a coming age when Israel is elevated above *while coexisting with* other nations (e.g., *Ezekiel 37:27–28*), and none of the prophecies concerning Christ clearly relate to an individual's afterlife.<sup>1</sup> During most of Israel's history, there was no hope placed in life after the grave, as illustrated by *Job 14:10–12*; *Psalms 30:9*; *Ecclesiastes 3:19–20*; and *Isaiah 38:18*. Also, the *wrath* envisioned in the prophecies is not an individualized one at the Judgment, but rather a global one where God *vindicates* Israel by punishing those who were oppressing it.

In conclusion, *the prophets portray a very different understanding of salvation than what is assumed today.*

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<sup>1</sup>Note that *Daniel 12:2*, the only clear description of the coming resurrection in the Old Testament, does not tie the event to Christ but rather the angel Michael. Resurrection language was sometimes used elsewhere figuratively to describe Judah's return to power.

## Salvation Now: The Spirit's Indwelling

While *salvation* is often thought of as “going to heaven,” some have a broader view of the term, holding that believers enjoy salvation *already* as a foretaste of heaven-after-Judgment. Depending on what church you attend or the kind of Christians you hang around, the notion that salvation is experienced *now* might sound rather odd. For those not familiar, let me give a crash course.

While the Mosaic covenant was in effect, the Spirit of God resided in the temple. The temple of the new covenant (the covenant instituted by Christ) is a spiritual one built from the souls of believers. To hold the Spirit and consecrate this temple, our souls had to be cleansed and healed, for **no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed.**<sup>2</sup>

*Romans 8* explains this at length, but you get the gist in *Ephesians 3:16–17*, where Paul describes his prayers. . . **He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner person, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. . .**

To grasp the Spirit's purpose, you must understand Israel's 2000-year struggle with God. The Old Testament chronicles the history of Israel and tells the sad tale of a people who could not remain faithful to God. This is *the* recurring problem in the Old Testament. *Jeremiah 31:31–34* shows God's response:

**A time is coming. . . when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I delivered them from Egypt. For they violated that covenant. . . I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. . . People will no longer need to teach their neighbors and relatives to know me.**

Christians join this covenant by receiving the Holy Spirit. Why does this count as salvation? By nature, we are enslaved to sin, much as a drug addict is enslaved to narcotics. We naturally tend to serve worldly desires rather than God's. The Spirit counsels us to know God's will and strengthens us to do it.

Christ refers to this freedom from sin's domination in *John 8:36* when He says **So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed**, and Paul refers to the same in *Acts 13:39*: . . . **and by this one everyone who believes is freed from all things from which you could not be freed by the Law of Moses.** Peter agrees in *2nd Peter 2:20*. Part of Hebrews is dedicated to this concept as well (see *Hebrews 9:14* and *10:1–2,14*).

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<sup>2</sup>*Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37; 1st Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2nd Corinthians 6:16.* See also *John 7:39; 16:12; ,7; Acts 1:4–5; 2:33–39; and Hebrews 9:14–17.*

## The Two Salvations Contrasted

So, then, we have two kinds of salvation. One salvation, which I'll call *deliverance*, describes what most people consider “the gospel” — being saved from hell. The other salvation, which I'll call *regeneration*, describes the healing and strengthening of a soul. In regeneration, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit from creatures mastered by our weaknesses into people who can overcome selfishness to be faithful to the Living God.

Many Christians only speak of deliverance. Others, especially those who refer to a personal relationship with Christ, consider both salvations as the “package deal” that faith gets you. If both kinds are taught, they are always presented as two sides of the same coin — inseparable.

But this “two sides of the same coin” notion is not supported by the Bible:

***They relate to different sets of people:*** Regeneration occurs only through the covenant enacted by Jesus, so only those who came after Christ are in a position to enjoy it. Deliverance transcends covenant, pertaining to all people, for all will be judged. We know some people who lived before Christ will survive the Judgment, but no one prior to Christ could enjoy regeneration through the Spirit, as noted in *John 7:39* and *Hebrews 11:39*, for the Spirit had not been given. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit can be *upon* someone, but not *inside*. The inside had to be cleaned first, as described in *Hebrews 9:14–23*.

***They address different effects of sin:*** Deliverance saves us *from accountability for sin* while regeneration heals us *from the debilitation due to sin*.

***They affect the actions of different agents:*** Deliverance saves us from *God's Judgment*; regeneration saves us from *sin's poisoning of our nature*. In *2nd Timothy 2:25–6*, Paul evinces hope that opponents of the church will be given . . . **knowledge of the truth and they will come to their senses and escape the devil's trap where they are held captive to do his will.**

***They speak to different desires:*** Regeneration speaks to God's desire to have a faithful people. Deliverance speaks to the human desire for immortality.

***They undo the consequences of different types of sin:*** Sacrifices were *never* instituted to *deliver* individuals from the consequences of deliberate defiance, as indicated by *Hebrews 9:7* and *Numbers 15:27–31*. *Hebrews 10:26*, written to believers who (according to *10:29*) have *already* been sanctified, gives a new covenant equivalent: **For if we deliberately keep on sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth, no further sacrifice for sins is left for us.** (Stay tuned to see why you don't have to be deathly discouraged by this warning.)

Paul and Christ list a raft of sins that appear to disqualify people from deliverance in *1st Corinthians 6:9–11* and *Revelation 21:8* respectively.

Conversely, none of these stops someone from gaining regeneration. *All* people can come to Christ and receive the Spirit. Many in Corinth had a history of practicing exactly the sins Paul warns against. This has a parallel in the Old Testament where the cleansing sacrifice (done to cleanse the temple, not to attain forgiveness for the people) had to cleanse for *all* sins.

***One is easier than the other:*** There are at least six ways given by the Bible to be forgiven of sins (escaping punishment for them), but *Hebrews 9:22* specifies only one way to purify a soul. (We’ll take a look at those six in chapter five.)

***Only one is prophesied:*** The Old Testament prophesies speak repeatedly of regeneration by the Spirit’s work on the heart in the coming age, but not deliverance from hell. They described Israel being freed *from its enemies*, not from *God’s eternal wrath*.<sup>3</sup>

Deliverance	Regeneration
The guilty pardoned	The guilty rehabilitated
Saves us from God’s wrath	Saves us from sin’s warping of our nature
Serves our desire	Serves God’s desire
Transcends covenants	Pertains only to the new covenant
Does not apply to some sins	Applies to all sins
Jesus as ferryman	Jesus as healer
Jesus as scapegoat	Jesus as Passover sacrifice <sup>4</sup>
Allows immortality	Supports faithfulness
Occurs on the final day	Occurs when one receives the Holy Spirit
Many routes to forgiveness	Only one route to cleansing
Not Messiah’s purpose	Part of Messianic Kingdom

<sup>3</sup>*Luke 1:70–71; Jeremiah 30:7–11; 31:31; Ezekiel 11:19; 34:23–39; 36:26; 37:23–38; Amos 9:11–15; Zechariah 12:9; and Joel 2:27–29*

<sup>4</sup>Actually, both atonement and Passover, because part of the atonement sacrifice was to cleanse the temple: *Hebrews 9:21–23*

## A Conjecture

I realized that *if* these two ideas, *regeneration* and *deliverance*, were not merely two sides of the same coin, it might solve the apparent conflict between Christ and Paul. Perhaps, I conjectured, when Paul says things like **For by grace you have been saved through faith** (*Ephesians 2:8*) he was using the term “saved” only in the *regeneration* sense! In other words, Paul used “saved” to denote the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and membership in the new covenant, not to refer to *deliverance* from hell.<sup>5</sup>

This goes beyond the question of what Paul means. The real question is “What does Jesus save us *from*.” I claim the Bible indicates Jesus saves us from many things, but God’s eternal wrath in hell is not one of them!<sup>6</sup>

I realize that may sound too preposterous to consider, like hearing the sun does not go around the earth. Given how the church has presented the gospel, the idea that salvation has nothing directly to do with the Judgment might make as much sense to you as putting an elevator in an outhouse.<sup>7</sup>

Keep in mind that the Jews saw the future resurrection in very simple terms — God would raise up the righteous, either to establish the kingdom described in the prophecies or after such a kingdom had been established. They did not have evangelicals around to tell them that we all naturally belong in hell and need Jesus to save us from that fate. Why would Paul use *salvation* to refer to a deliverance no one (in the 1st century) thought was needed? Indeed, the most affluent Jewish class, the Sadducees, did not believe in an afterlife of any kind, yet they looked forward to the Christ bringing salvation to the Jews.

The prophecies that speak of the Christ do not cast *salvation* as “deliverance from God’s eternal wrath,” a notion that can hardly be found anywhere in the Old Testament. Rather, the prophets of God who spoke of the Savior saw an ordained King leading them out of oppression to serve God. They were not being saved *from God*, they were being saved *for God*. The problem disrupting the kingdom created by the old covenant was not “how can I get these sinners into heaven later.” The problem was that God’s people were not doing God’s will. In addition to idolatry, there was massive injustice and mistreatment of the poor. These were the problems that caused Israel and Judah to be oppressed, and these are the problems Christ came to address. As Peter claims in *Acts 3:26*, **God raised up His servant and sent Him first to you, to bless you by turning each one of you from your iniquities.**

<sup>5</sup>Similar remarks hold for **justify**. See chapter ten.

<sup>6</sup>Jesus *did* assuage God’s wrath, but not in the way most Christians suggest. That’s a topic for chapters nine, ten, and eleven.

<sup>7</sup>a line I stole from *Road House*

Christ strengthens our spirit so we can overcome selfish, ungodly desires, the unfaithfulness that destroyed Israel and leads God to proclaim the need for a new covenant in *Jeremiah 31:31–34*. It is this salvation Paul describes in *Romans 7:14–8:9*, which we will examine in chapter ten. Luckily, Paul puts it in clearer terms in *Romans 6:6* . . . **our old man was crucified with Him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us**. Other allusions include *Titus 3:5* and *2nd Thessalonians 2:13*.

This was part of a larger salvation picture, but once again it is the *salvation of the Jews* that is in view. Peter describes the role forgiveness of sins plays in *Acts 3:19–20*. Forgiveness allows for the receipt of the Spirit (the **times of refreshing** in *3:19*, also see *Acts 2:38*) in the present, a gift to tie us over until Christ returns once **all things have been restored**. It was the expectation of this return of Christ and establishment of a new kingdom of God that the early Christians were focused on. Moses freed the sons of Abraham from idolatry and physical slavery to found a kingdom for God based on the old covenant. Jesus is doing the same on a grander scale: freeing people from sin to join a new covenant in the kingdom He is returning to claim.

At present this “freedom from sin” is in the form of the Spirit, which frees us from the *domination* of sin (though we still feel tempted by it and can unwisely choose to indulge in it). After Christ’s return, our bodies will be transformed as well, just as Christ’s was, and no longer prone to our selfish desires. Thus, salvation is all about repentance, transformed hearts, and transformed bodies, not about God doing accounting tricks to let us into heaven. *The idea that Christ’s work is meant to altar the consequences of His own righteous judgment on the last day has absolutely no basis anywhere in scripture.*

I’m not trying to persuade you that I’m right (yet) . . . just that if I were right it would no longer force Jesus and Paul to conflict. It also unknots a whole mess of other tangles we haven’t even discussed yet!

If this present liberation is Paul’s focus, the great disconnect between Christ’s version of the final Judgment and Paul’s discussion of salvation would disappear in a single stroke. There would be no conflict because Paul does not have the final Judgment in mind when he writes of salvation and justification.

We would no longer have to make excuses for Christ (and the gospel writers) because Christ and Paul would be talking about different things.

I realize this probably seems completely alien to you. What would lead me to even consider it? I would later find significant support for this idea within Paul’s writing, but it was John’s that gave me the first clue.

## John and *Eternal Life*

When trying to describe Jesus' teachings to his Greek audience, John uses the term **eternal life**<sup>8</sup> *a lot*, as often as all other New Testament writers combined. I noticed that this **eternal life** is used in a peculiar fashion. In particular, John writes of **eternal life** in a way resembling present *regeneration* through the Spirit rather than future *deliverance*.<sup>9</sup>

Three arrows pointed me to this understanding of **eternal life**:

### Arrow 1. Present Tense

Jesus says people have **eternal life now**,<sup>10</sup> which should be our first clue that perhaps the term does not mean what we think it means. If we *already* have **eternal life**, and we still die, then the term (as used by John) cannot mean the type of immortality we expect our bodies to have after the resurrection.

Some explain this by saying **eternal life** is a promise of the *real* eternal life we'll have later. A more accurate claim would be that **eternal life** refers to an actual evidence (i.e. the Holy Spirit), rather than merely a doctrinal claim, that proves to us what God is planning in the future. This is how the early Christians saw it. Just as the freedom from captivity was hard evidence to the Israelites that God intended to fulfill the promise made to Abraham, the present spiritual transformation by the Holy Spirit is proof of the physical transformation God intends later. This is proof of God's power and intent, not an individual guarantee. Thousands of Israelites saw God's power in the manna and the exodus, but not all were allowed into the promised land (see *Hebrews 3:11–13*).

Christians defend the idea that "eternal life" can be used in the present to refer to the assured immortality they have later by claiming that once you come to faith you can never fall away. This doctrine is known as "once saved — always saved." I call it OSAS.

Jesus seems to think differently on the matter. He pleads with His disciples in *John 15:4–6* to **remain in me**, an exhortation that would make little sense if it were impossible to fall away. In *Matthew 13:20* Jesus refers to a group of people who believe and **receive the word with great joy**, but ultimately lose faith. *Hebrews 6:4* describes people who have been **partakers of the Holy Spirit** (impossible without genuine faith) falling away, and *2nd Peter 2:20–22* similarly pertains to genuine believers who become re-ensnared to the world.

<sup>8</sup>Or the Greek we translate as **eternal life** — more on that later

<sup>9</sup>I was to learn later *why* John uses the term **eternal life** in this way, but that will have to wait for chapter four. At the time I had no understanding of the Jewish context or Greek words behind that phrase.

<sup>10</sup>*John 3:36; 5:24; and 10:28* are three examples.

Add to this the many passages where Paul and others ask believers to continue in the faith. People who believe in OSAS largely use Paul's letters to defend their views. . . so one wonders why Paul himself urges his audience so to remain **firm in the faith** and why he worries that his readers had **believed in vain**. *1st Thessalonians 3:7-8* and *Galatians 4:11* (spoken to a community who already **believed**, see *Galatians 3:1*) are particularly difficult for OSAS supporters, as is Paul's cautioning believers not to **destroy** other believers **for whom Christ died** in *Romans 14:15* and his concern for himself in *1st Corinthians 9:27*.

## Arrow 2. Life and the Spirit

I found that John uses **eternal life** as others use **Spirit**. I'll give three examples here and then an interesting synthesis. Remember, I'm not proving anything right now. I'm trying to illustrate what clues caused me to *conjecture* that salvation refers to a purely present gift separate from the Judgment.

*Observation 1: Both eternal life and the Holy Spirit indwell.*

*John 4:4* . . . **but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.**

*1st John 3:15* **Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; . . . no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.**

*Acts 9:17* . . . **has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.**

*Romans 8:11* . . . **through His Spirit who dwells in you.**

*1st Cor 3:16* **Do you not know that you are a temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you?**

*Observation 2: Both eternal life and the Holy Spirit are promised.*

We will discuss the importance of "The Promise" later. A sampling now.

*Luke 24:49* **And behold, I am sending on you what my Father promised. . .**

*Acts 2:33* . . . **and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father. . .**

*Galatians 3:14* . . . **so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit by faith.**

*1st John 2:25* **This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life.**

*1st John 1:2* . . . and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.

Note the last example says **the eternal life** (it's there in the Greek, too), as though it is an object, being, or force instead of a condition. Similarly for the phrases **with the Father** and now **manifested to us**. *Acts 2:36* describes the sending of the Holy Spirit as *the* blessing promised to Abraham. The early Christians saw the Spirit as proof that God was fulfilling the promise to Abraham to found a godly kingdom through which all nations would be blessed.

*Observation 3: The life Jesus has sounds like it must be the Spirit.*

Several verses refer to Jesus having *life* that would be hard to understand if it didn't mean *indwelling of the Holy Spirit*. For example **In Him was Life, and the Life was the light of mankind** and **For just as the Father has Life in Himself, He has granted the Son to Have Life in Himself**.<sup>11</sup> It's difficult to see how the life that the Father **has granted** Jesus to have could refer to anything other than the Holy Spirit.

*Synthesis: Jesus' Anointing*

We begin to see the deep cohesion among these observations when we put *1st John 1:2* together with *John 1:1,14*. John takes an abstract term, **the Word**, and declares it was **with God** and then **dwelt among us**, referring to **the Word's** manifestation as Christ. And then (in *1st John 1:2*) he takes another abstract term **the Eternal Life** and says that it was **with the Father** and now **manifested to us**. Given that John's gospel describes the Spirit as being a guide sent to dwell in the disciples after Christ leaves them (*John 14:16–20*). Christ is **the Word** manifest to us, and the Spirit is **the Eternal Life**, the blessing promised to Abraham, first given to Christ — so important every gospel spells it out: *Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:4,32–33* — and then manifest to us (*1st John 1:2*) as an **eternal inheritance** after his death (*Hebrews 9:14–15*).

### Arrow 3. The Jewish Notion of Life

In chapter four I'll describe how Jesus' notion of life is linked to being part of God's house. Jesus uses death to refer to those outside God's favor.<sup>12</sup> If the Holy Spirit is the gift of the new, eternal covenant Jesus enacted, then **eternal life** becomes an apt metaphor for its receipt.

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<sup>11</sup>*John 1:4* and *5:26*

<sup>12</sup>*Matthew 8:22; 23:27*; and, as we will see later, *John 5:25*

## Why Is This Important?

You might be feeling a bit lost... wondering *So what?* about all this. *Why does it matter if “eternal life” and “salvation” are things Christians have in the present rather than the future?*

The passages that plainly describe the Judgment or speak of people going to hell describe a Judgment very different from the one espoused by evangelicals. Most of the passages that are used to support the modern gospel use words like **saved** and **eternal life**. But if these refer to the present rather than the future, they are no longer relevant to the Judgment.

If these passages refer to how Jesus teaches us to know the Father rather than how God grades our final exam, then they no longer support the notion that all believers (and *only* believers) survive the Judgment.

Even those passages where **eternal life** appears to refer to the future often deserve a second look. In *John 6:40* Jesus says . . . **everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day**. If **eternal life** meant what we might normally think, wouldn't the order be different? Wouldn't Jesus *first* resurrect us and *then* give eternal life?

From hearing most Christians talk, you get the impression that all your sins are presented at the Judgment. Since even one sin makes us unfit for heaven, anyone who is not forgiven is damned, and that forgiveness is given to people who believe in Christ (and no one else).

Problem is, none of that appears in the Bible. *There is not a passage anywhere that refers to forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ playing a role in the Judgment*. That point alone should make you wonder if modern Christians have talked themselves into an understanding of Christ's purpose far afield from the gospel the apostles spread.

Claiming salvation lives in the present has a more personal impact as well. *1st Peter 1:18* says Jesus saves us from an **empty way of life**. We all have felt that. We all know the quiet desperation of living in a world that seduces us to seek that which we cannot attain, a world where our history, our baggage, and others' expectations shackle our spirits. Christ invites us to fulfillment *today* by showing us the one Lord whose opinion matters while conditioning and healing us to meet that Lord's expectations. In Christ, *anyone* can succeed in the only way that counts — if you can love God and your neighbor while renouncing the world's lies, you can serve well and please the only Master who matters.

## Summary and Final Notes

All I've done so far is present a conjecture that Christian *salvation* often refers to a purely present-day blessing/condition linked to the new covenant and that it has nothing directly to do with the Judgment. Jesus' work was not to *curb* God's eternal wrath but rather to *cure* Satan's poisoning of our spiritual health which makes us unable to live faithfully. We are being saved from our spiritual weakness, not from accountability. Christ came to lead people out of spiritual captivity to form a kingdom after God's heart, a kingdom Jesus would return to claim visibly later.

In short, *salvation* addresses our sinful natures, the saboteur of the first covenant. This matches the need for, purpose of, and salvation wrought by the coming savior as found in the Later Prophets.

I've shown how the two ideas Christians refer to as "salvation" are not inextricably linked to each other and the Jewish conception of salvation did not include deliverance from God's eternal wrath. It is their conception of salvation we must consider if we are to understand the Bible (which was written by Jews). The Christian church did not begin thinking of salvation primarily as a heaven-and-hell affair until hundreds of years later. Why do we read our Western, modern definition of salvation into words written by 1st-century Jews?

If my conjecture were true, if **salvation** principally refers to the present, Paul and Christ would no longer conflict. We would also be able to give satisfying answers to questions that trouble modern Christianity. Examples: *How can anyone in the Old Testament go to heaven? Why does Jesus talk so much about sin if all that really matters in the end is whether someone believes?*

Maybe this is a *frame* that can hold the puzzle pieces without our jamming them in, a frame that has room for Christ's actual teaching. As a substantial bonus, this distinction allows us to genuinely investigate the Bible's teachings on the *Judgment* without fretting over what our conclusions imply about *salvation*.

John uses the term **eternal life** in a way that supports this idea, except I couldn't find a verse that comes right out and says **eternal life** really means knowing God in the new covenant sense through the Holy Spirit. I searched and searched for such a confirmation and could not find it.

As closely as it would match the description of the new covenant given in *Jeremiah 31:34*, as nicely as it would remove the apparent conflict between Paul and Jesus, as much as it would make sense of all those difficult passages we Christians gloss over, I couldn't really get behind the concept without at least one direct passage confirming what **eternal life** was...and that's where the Calvinist I mentioned earlier comes in.